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Maxwell, William

Inaugural address
delivered at the...

Manchester

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DELIVERED AT THE

TWENTY-NINTH ANNUAL

Co-operative Congress,

Held at Perth, June 7th, 1897.

BY

MR. WILLIAM MAXWELL, J.P.

(Chairman of the Scottish Wholesale Society).



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INAUGURAL ADDRESS,

*Delivered at the Twenty-ninth Annual Co-operative Congress,
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By MR. WILLIAM MAXWELL, J.P.

(CHAIRMAN OF THE SCOTTISH WHOLESALE SOCIETY).

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—When one thinks of the many eminent men who have filled the presidential chair at these Congresses, or of the brilliant addresses delivered by them, where they frequently touched some new and hidden spring of co-operative thought, from which flowed new conceptions and ideas, leading up to higher and better ideals of life and duty; when one thinks of this to-day, then the president of this Congress may well request your indulgence and sympathy.

The only claim I have to this exalted position—if claim it may be called—is that I am one of yourselves. Reluctant although I was to accept the great honour, but still greater responsibility of delivering the inaugural address, I cannot help thinking there is much to be said in favour of having one of the actual workers in the movement to express himself on the present position and possible future development of our work.

This ground has been so often travelled by keen and eloquent observers, who have treated the subject from every conceivable standpoint, that I find myself surrounded by well-beaten tracks at the very outset. Still, the continually-changing aspects and conditions of society, the ever-widening area of civilisation, the rapid and beneficent march of education, on social matters particularly, leaves countless unexplored ways, which, if pursued with a righteous purpose and calm determination, must lead to a higher and more humane state of society than we have at present around us.

The results of the gospel and practice of the competitive system are but a poor compliment to the past centuries of education, civilisation, and Christianity. Hence the present uprising of the masses, with their many condemnations of the past and present, and their many remedies for the future.

In earlier times men might have supplied all their wants largely by their own individual exertions, and were thus some what independent of their neighbour; but society, as we know it, is so complex, so woven together in vital interests, that we could not, although we tried, exist without the assistance of each other. Knowing, then, our absolute dependence, shall we continue the present unchristian struggle, each fighting for himself, trampling, in our selfishness, on the interests, and it may be the lives, of others in our determination to be rich or powerful? Or shall we acknowledge this law in nature, which holds good in the lowest as well as in the highest spheres, which guides the evolution of all material things, and is the all-inclusive condition of spiritual progress—"That no individual is allowed to live entirely to himself"? Unless, then, we are prepared to throw aside all that is beautiful in religion and humanity, we must aim at a closer and more collective state of society where men's best energies and aspirations will be given to improve the commonwealth. A firmer belief in the brotherhood of mankind would throw open a long vista of new hopes and happiness to both rich and poor, for social distinctions, like poverty, too often sap our best feelings and desires—

"Before man made us citizens, great Nature made us men."

This may be neither the time nor place to dwell in detail on the wretched results that have flown from unrestricted competition. Like the poor, they are always with us. But this is an opportunity of dealing with the greatest and most powerful antithesis that the world has yet seen. Co-operation, properly understood, must set the pace in all reforms in trading, whether it be in fair dealing or exchange between buyer and seller—the better treatment and the fullest recognition of labour's claims; in fact, the promotion of a higher morality in every-day life and business, giving all those who at present go to the wall, because they are not the strongest and swiftest, a chance of living more hopeful, sweeter, and useful lives, and thus increasing the sum total of the world's happiness.

The exceedingly rapid growth of our movement in membership, trade, and capital; the ever increasing desire to multiply our productive efforts; the variety and novelty of ideas that are ever pouring in upon us, regarding what should be our methods in future action; the great efforts of the traders to put a drag upon the proposed emancipation of the people—which is a compliment to the power of co-operation—may be reasous sufficient to warrant us in asking if our present methods of procedure could be improved on.

The very advance of co-operation to greater usefulness, its gradual but certain progress towards some form of community of thought and action, has raised up new difficulties and new opponents that may require to be reckoned with in the near future, if our movement is to take that place in the national life of the people which it is entitled to. I hail, then, with satisfaction such a gathering as this, where we may have a stocktaking of our present position, and if necessary suggest such alterations as will lead to even a better and larger balance in our favour in years to come. That co-operation has come to stay, no intelligent observer will now seek to deny. That it is capable of almost unlimited extension is now acknowledged by both friend and foe. Its power and efficacy in raising the standard of living, and of making the condition of the toiler more tolerable, is already proved beyond contradiction.

How then can we spread its usefulness, that the masses may be thoroughly and intelligently organised, and their thoughts and aspirations made known to the world? This seems to be the question which we are called upon to solve. Self-introspection occasionally in the individual is not only productive of much good to himself, but frequently to those around him. Applied to a collective body, I think it must bring corresponding results.

The greatest retarding factor we have to deal with is the apathy and indifference of the great bulk of our members, but this need not be wondered at, when you consider that all are admitted without test or qualification, the outstanding attraction to many being the financial gain; beyond this many never give a single thought. This is to be deplored; but the despairing position of our class, from a material point of view, has much to do with this state of matters.

To far too many of our members the binding power of co-operation is represented by the dividend; but if we are to widen our field of operations and usefulness

conviction in the truth and justice of our principles must be the true binding power of the movement, that promises not only to materially and socially improve the individual, but generally change the methods of society in the interest of all. The difficulty of getting this into the minds of the people may be enormous, but the results would be incalculable. It means great effort without immediate results. It means the expenditure of labour and money, with little prospect of proportionate return. But, in such work we have many brilliant illustrations in other movements that may well encourage us to step out of our present, shall I say parsimonious methods of education, into a large, comprehensive, and enthusiastic system of preaching the gospel of co-operation.

The temperance movement has only secured its present position by dint of lavish expenditure of time, energy, and money. It spends its thousands freely and cheerfully to spread and encourage its principles, while we make our millions annually, and rather grudgingly give of our easy-made wealth for the dissemination of co-operative knowledge. I do not underrate the efforts that are being made in many parts of the country, nor do I belittle the praiseworthy spirit shown by many societies; but most of these efforts are local or sectional, while what I am about to plead for is a national system of co-operative representation in public bodies, that will keep before every man and woman in the land the power they have in their own hands, if they will only wisely use it for the good of all.

Our trades union friends, by their persistent and tenacious policy, and by the expenditure of considerable sums annually, have become a power to be reckoned with, both in and out of Parliament. Their public policy has drawn unthinking men to see the unenviable condition of labour in the past. It has voiced the aspirations of the worker, till now the statute-book of our country reflects, nearly every session, the presence and power of trades unionism. This is not the result of a Micawber policy, "waiting till something turns up." It is the result of a high state of organisation, a clear and definite policy of progress; in fact, a determination that labour should be properly recognised and fully rewarded.

To my mind, whatever improves the condition of labour is in the highest sense in the best interest of co-operation. If our movement is to take up that position which it is rapidly

making for—namely, the possession of much of the trade of the country, both productive and distributive—then we shall have to step out and take a larger share of public duties, by a closer association with municipal and imperial affairs than we have hitherto thought of. I am aware that many—nay, possibly the majority—of my audience are ready to cry out, "No politics in co-operation." I do not seek to introduce politics into co-operation, but I am most anxious to see co-operation introduced more into politics. With a business of possibly sixty millions per annum, with nearly a seventh of the whole population of England and Scotland connected with the movement, with an ever-increasing demand for more land to build on or new leases wherever to conduct our business, is it possible for this immense force, which is year after year trenching more and more on the ground or preserves of men who up till now took little or no interest in our advance, because they thought we would never reach them—is it possible, think you, they will sit quietly by while co-operation is slowly but surely squeezing them outwards? I think not, and if we are to meet this difficulty intelligently it must be by an aroused enthusiasm—a determination to take our proportionate share of all public duties, at whatever cost. If co-operation is to become a permanent part of the nation's life, if we are to trade with other nations, as has been eloquently advocated at previous Congresses, if we are to see the land come back to a co-operative people, who are yearning to divide its products among those who labour with either head or hand, then our present somewhat restful policy of propaganda and education must be substituted by an aggressive and outspoken policy of unity of action, on the part of the people, irrespective of party politics or doctrinal creeds.

It may not be expedient to send members to the House of Commons at present, at our own expense, although I am prepared to go that length at once; but it is surely pressing that care should be taken that no one gets to that place with your help who is not in full sympathy with the people's cause and the people's aspirations. I have heard some representative co-operators declare, that we would send representatives to Parliament when they were paid by the nation. Begin now, I say, and the national payment will come the sooner.

Every interest that is worth preserving, and a great many interests that are not worth preserving, have their representatives, and let their voice be heard in our great public bodies.

For example, we have the brewers and distillers carefully guarding their particular interests with a jealous eye. We have the temperance party bravely fighting against enormous odds, still always keeping their cause to the front. We have the army and navy interest represented, ever calling for more armaments, all, they say, in the interest of peace. We have banking and law zealously watching their own particular interests. Even the bondholders of foreign states are represented, and not infrequently shape the foreign policy of our country, for which we have to pay dearly. We have labour as yet but feebly represented proportionately, whose hands could be greatly strengthened by co-operators, not for any particular party, but for everything that tended towards justice, truth, and purity.

Lastly, we have the landed interests to deal with. Here we have the heaped-up iniquities of centuries too largely represented. No movement or section of the community of our time has more interest in reformed land-laws than co-operators; and yet, I am sorry to say, no organised section seems to take less interest in the subject. Estates are passing into our hands, farming is being taken up by many of our societies, building sites are continually in demand, and yet the circuitous, expensive, and, I must add, frequently unjust forms of transference of land remain, for the ostensible purpose of enriching the few at the cost of the many. This is not the place to elaborate the reforms required, but, come when they may, co-operators ought not to let others fight the battle which is so largely theirs.

Our opponents boast of having made friends of many members of Parliament, and of having eradicated the reference to co-operation from the school books. This is only one of the proofs of the fact that, although a great and rapidly-increasing social movement, our voice is small and almost unheard.

If the future is so full of promise as we believe it to be, for coming co-operators; if the next generation, who will be the beneficiaries of the present; if they are to take hold of the administration of this mighty force for good, why, I would ask, do you allow them to be trained in the spirit of "Devil take the hindmost"? Why should they not be taught about a system of society which will give all an equality of opportunity, that will call forth man's best services, because it tends to the happiness of all? Instead of which they are

being trained and fitted to compete and scramble with each other for place and power; or it may be a bare existence. Here, then, is an outlet for your educational enthusiasm, and also your educational funds. The voice of the representative co-operator should be heard on every school board in the country, and could be, if we were sufficiently interested in a united people, instead of an individualistic conflict.

In municipal matters our policy is clear. In many towns co-operators are in the majority of the ratepayers, and yet the conduct of the town's business is left to those who can have no interest in the growing power of the people through co-operation. There are many exceptions where our members are doing good work, but still it is not sufficiently recognised, that we have duties and obligations in this respect which we cannot depute to others. Many other positions and public offices ought to be filled by representatives of a cause, that aims at justice in all things, and more especially in its dealings with labour. Hence I claim the powerful assistance of this great social movement to raise our public positions above the suspicion of self, and a scramble for place and power; to use them only as a means, whereby the masses will be raised both socially and morally.

These propositions will doubtless find many opponents, because of the aggressive spirit they breathe; but they are brought forward because I feel as a practical worker that our future advance may be retarded by our very dimensions unless we come out more into the open, and declare to the world our policy and principles, and be ready to defend them when they are attacked. It would be a comparatively easy matter to give an address that would not offend the opinions nor disturb the policy of many most estimable co-operators, but if these Congresses are to do all the good they are capable of, then it must be by looking ahead, and shaping our methods to suit the ever-changing circumstances, and, it may be, meet the new difficulties which are sure to grow out of our very success. If these suggestions are to take root, there must be at once a closer organisation of co-operators than obtains at present. Too often, I am sorry to say, has a co-operative candidate for a public place been unsuccessful, not for want of co-operative strength in the locality, but really, for lack of co-operative enthusiasm among those who should have been supporters.

Turning to the present position of the movement, there is indeed, much to rejoice over, much to applaud, and much to be grateful for.* Its ever-widening area speaks of unceasing

toil and unwearyed effort. Its rapidly-swelling capital tells of the painless thrift, and the growing material prosperity of our constantly-increasing membership. It points to receding poverty and advancing independence, brighter and more comfortable homes, sweeter and more loveable lives. For it never can be doubted that poverty, or the despair which always accompanies it, is the direct cause of much of the intemperance and crime which has stained the annals of the masses, and greatly retarded intelligent progress.

But our very successes have not been unmixed blessings. Too frequently we find as a society grows rich and prosperous the difficulty of keeping it a compact whole becomes greater. Thus in many towns in England and Scotland we find, instead of one great society ministering to the people's wants, two or three, sometimes half-a-dozen societies. This is a blot on our good name, while it too often, if not always, perpetuates a form of competition that is neither desirable nor co-operative. In every case where you make inquiries into the cause, you will be told it is a necessity, that it was impossible to continue working harmoniously with the original society leaders, and therefore a secession was resorted to. A few years after and history repeats itself, until the parent society finds itself surrounded by a group of competing societies, all, it may be, working on similar lines, and professing to be carrying out the same principles, yet only co-operative in name. If there must be a number of societies in a locality, let a strong effort be made to have well defined areas of operation.

There are times in the history of all institutions when a severe strain may be put on the loyalty of its best members, when its principles are being flagrantly violated, or when justice is denied and truth perverted. All this has occurred, and has caused schisms that it would be difficult to condemn. But what we are interested in here is, are we to go on wasting time, energy, and money because of wrongs once committed, that have now become historical, and cannot possibly have any living interest to the present membership? The life of the movement in many centres is thus sapped, because of the unfortunate competitive attitude taken up by rival societies.

It may be easier to point to the disease than to apply the remedy to the present state of overlapping. As a rule societies thus situated resent all interference from without. Efforts innumerable have been made to unite and

amalgamate, but with comparatively little success. Everywhere there is evidence that it is not the ordinary members that resist the efforts at reconciliation. You will frequently find that committees have more to do with the evils of overlapping than the expressed wish of the members. Our Co-operative Union has a most important duty in connection with this question. Every section and conference district, should keep persistently appealing to societies who are competing, to merge their interests, and thus make their work more co-operative. Publicity of these efforts, and their results, will in the long run surely shame such societies to unite, and thus economise the energy and money that at present are being frittered away.

Educational work can never be carried on with anything like the same satisfactory results by two or three competing agencies, compared with one great comprehensive system, which would cost less and be more effectual. The evil of this question is emphasised by the neck-and-neck race to pay the highest dividend, causing incalculable mischief to our principles, and bringing ridicule upon our good name. To the unthinking, the highest dividend represents the best form of administrative ability and management, while in reality the best and highest form of co-operation is to be found where the making of character is considered as well as money. The subject is one that ought to interest us all, and should enlist our best thoughts for remedial effort.

There is no intelligent observer of the growth of the co-operative movement, but must be struck by the enthusiasm that animates some of its organisations for propagandist work. Without being invidious, when so much excellent and gratuitous service is freely given, no one can deny a foremost place to our Women's Co-operative Guild. Possibly its immediate good results cannot be tabulated or measured, but who will question the immense power for good that underlies an association of women in such a cause as co-operation? To say nothing of the new light which it is letting in on many monotonous lives, it is making the study of social matters possible at our firesides. It is bringing the new social truths home to the children through Nature's chosen teacher. The home is thus made brighter because of the new social hopes, and life receives a new impetus from the responsibility that accompanies all enthusiastic work and endeavour. Such an organisation deserves well of every society in the country. Encourage it then by liberal and generous treatment, for its power for good and genuine co-operative propaganda is simply unlimited.

Another agency that has immense potentialities for good work, and which I fear is not recognised with sufficient favour, is our employes' associations. That during the last few years a great and beneficent change has come over the condition of our employes, everyone is pleased to admit. Fewer hours of labour and better remuneration may be given, and are, I believe, given, from two motives. First, because it encourages better service; and second, because it is the mission of co-operation to make the conditions of labour as tolerable and pleasant as possible. This is the true and proper motive, and will equally bring out the highest and best in a conscientious employe. What we wish for is that they become part of ourselves, taking a living and sustained interest in the spread of co-operative thought and action, not only in their own methods and localities, but in every form and in every land. If there has been the slightest dissatisfaction at any time it has arisen rather from want of thought on the part of committees. Let members of committees cease comparing their own conditions with those of their employes, rather let there be a friendly rivalry among societies, as to who will give the best conditions, so that among other good results, the traders in your locality will be shamed into following the example of the co-operators. The power of our movement in this respect is incalculable, and if properly yielded would bring untold blessings to labour generally. One of the retarding factors in some localities, to better conditions, is the craze for high profits. I grant that this may bring in new members, but it is in some cases a deterrent to the very poor. While a large membership is eminently desirable, a high standard of conditions of labour and large-heartedness to the poor is still more co-operative. The intelligent and enthusiastic co-operative storekeeper is perhaps one of the best propagandist agents we could wish for. The employes' associations ought to be recognised and encouraged as means of mental as well as material improvement. Their representatives ought to be here, to speak out from their point of view the bearing of the movement on the lives and prospects of their members. For I hold strongly, that whatever tends to brighten the lives of our employes will be reflected in the harmony and prosperity of the movement.

On the vexed question of profit-sharing with employes we are not likely at present to be in perfect agreement. Still, I think as the light of education gets more thrown on the question of capital and labour, the co-operative worker will get the more dissatisfied with the present method of fixing remuneration, which is largely determined by the competitive

system. Labour everywhere is gradually but surely awakening to its true position as regards its power in wealth production. Co-operators, having sympathy with labour's aspiration, should step in front of the competitive world, and recognise this power by improving upon the competitive systems of remuneration.

The true friends of profit-sharing should not pin their faith to any particular system of profit division, but leave the widest possible liberty to divide profits either in bonus, superannuation, or in such ways as seem best to each organisation. The recognition of the principle is far more important than the methods of its application. It must therefore be a source of satisfaction to all to know that the greatest co-operative institution in the world has lately, almost unanimously, adopted this humane and truly co-operative principle. Thus our work of conciliation—of thought and action—makes for true and lasting peace, where I trust employer and employe have but one interest and one motive, namely, the highest good of humanity.

The co-operative movement has a high and hopeful future, according to the zeal and high sense of duty that is brought to bear on the work. Awake, then, the enthusiasm of your members, let them feel that each has a part to play, and that each can yield good service in our reforming efforts. Get them to realise that co-operation is the silver lining of the cloud that has so long hung over the social prospects of the worker. Thus, by encouragement of all our agencies, we will not only lessen the risk of internal friction, and lack of confidence in united action, but we will increase the number of paths, and make it more easy to the increasing numbers, who are wishful to reach the higher social life. Our best energies, properly directed, should make our distributive efforts reach down to the poorest of the community, whilst the basis of all our productive exertions should be broad and generous enough to enlist the interest of all great employers of labour, and encourage them to share with the workers the wealth they help to create. Selfishness must find no place in a movement that aims at making the people happier and better. John Ruskin says:—"That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings. That man is wealthiest, who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others." In this spirit the work that lies before us must be accomplished. Let jealousies sink at once and for ever

among ourselves, and no combination, however great or powerful, will be able to stay the progress of an intelligently united people.

Patriotism has too often been used to denote the warrior, but he is the truest lover of fatherland who seeks to promote peace, justice, and truth among his fellows. This is the pressing work lying invitingly before us all, and the present is only ours.

Seize the instant; even he who will,
With the waters that are past, cannot impel the mill.

A splendid groundwork for almost unlimited extension is presented by the ever-extending ramifications of the two Wholesale Societies, whose power and usefulness is being felt and prized in all parts of the world. These mighty organisations, the greatest and proudest possessions of labour, are silently, but surely, bringing the knowledge of the power and efficiency of co-operation home to the workers in every land. They are leading in the conditions which they mete out to their workers. They are setting up a high morality in trade and commerce, yet a few of our societies take no part in this world-wide good work. Gentlemen, our future hopes most certainly depend on unity; and if poverty and ignorance are to be minimised, if labour is to be exalted, if capital is to take the place of the inanimate thing it is, if love for each other instead of self-interest is to be our ideal, if this beautiful world, with all the advantages of centuries of civilisation, is to be the inheritance of all, instead of as at present only a few, if life on earth is to be more like what we are led to believe life is in heaven, then unity of thought and action must be our every-day motto. From this standpoint our work will become pleasant and fruitful. Opponents will see that our aim is humanity's good, irrespective of creed or colour. In the high hope that this Congress will be characterised by an enthusiastic desire for unity, by an earnest and impatient yearning to let our voice, as social reformers, be heard in every representative public body in the land, and by an eager desire to improve commerce morally, and to make labour more tolerable. If these are your desires, you will help to—

Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

The President's inaugural address was delivered with force and clearness; it was heard with profound attention, and frequently applauded by the delegates.

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